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ABSTRACT

U.S. agriculture has built its reputation on the best agricultural education system in the world. However, its greatness only provides a solid foundation on which to build an even better future. Some things that must be done to meet the challenge of the future are the following: (1) change the stereotypes of what farming is; vocational agriculture is not just for growing things on the farm--it is for the entire process of developing and delivering food and goods to the consumer; (2) refine the image that the public has of the farmer and elevate the farmer's self-image; (3) require courses on food production and food economy for all students, at high school or junior college levels; and (4) recruit city students into agricultural education, because the field of agriculture will reach far beyond its traditional boundaries--for example, into bioengineering. Meeting the challenge to improve and expand the image of vocational agriculture will enable agricultural educators to participate in the exciting field of food production in the future. (KC)

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Thank you for inviting me to be with you today. It's most flattering to be asked to make a speech, and it's even a bigger compliment to be asked to offer an opinion on one of the most important functions our society performs...the education of our youth!

I've wondered how to present my credentials to you. I've asked myself,"What are my qualifications?" "What can I offer this group?" What makes me worthy of addressing you?

The answer to these questions lies in the relationship we have. We come to this meeting with different points of view. You from the ivy covered halls...me from an agricultural manufacturing company. But we share a common interest in education. We share a common goal to do things tomorrow better than we're doing them today. Education will play a pivotal role in determining how well each of us achieves this goal.

I bring with me a viewpoint that represents a company that has a reputation for being heavily into research - research that requires trained, disciplined, inquisitive minds. For in those minds, the minds that are still open, still growing, still receptive to new thoughts lie the solutions to the challenges Monsanto faces today and will face tomorrow.

Perhaps my thoughts and the improvements you'll add to them as you reflect on what I say will be a catalyst...perhaps a starting point from which we'll move in unison to solve some of the problems facing vo-ag education.

First, let's stand tall and be proud of what we are. We are the best fed nation on earth--and that's no accident!

We are the best fed because we are the best producers on earth--and that's no accident either!

American agriculture built it's premiere reputation on a key cornerstone -- the best agricultural education system in the world. And those who paint a picture of doom and gloom haven't looked over the horizon lately.

Our problems -- as big as they are -- as real as they are -- need to be kept in prospective. Other countries would consider themselves truly blessed if our ag problems were their biggest worries.

We're good -- no doubt about it. But our greatness only provides a solid foundation on which we must build an even better tomorrow... We must move forward.

PAUSE

You and I both know agriculture and education are very conservative. I'm not sure I'd have it any other way.

The thoughts I'll share with you have been developed with full knowledge that some might take awhile to be implemented. Others need to be refined and still others might not deserve to see the light of day after they have been considered.

- I'd like to talk about stereotypes, especially the ones that need changing...
- About the image the public has of farming, farmers and food production...and the image farmers have of themselves.
- I'll suggest that consumers need to know where their food originates, and that the responsibility for their education rests with us.
- To succeed in the future urban kids must enter the picture because the picture of ag in the future will be as far-out as the outer limits of space.

For starters --

We must speed up the process of drawing city kids into the scientific, engineering and technical fields that provide the direct support for farming. Let's come up with some new names that aren't encumbered with past stereotyped

images -- Agri-business was a start, but let's extend beyond Agri-Science; Agri-Marketing; and Agri-Business and establish new names for new occupations and let's add the glamor and the respect that will help draw qualified candidates.

We must add to these areas the same kind of allure that aerospace, Wall Street and investment banking now has.

We must make the point and communicate our point clearly that vo-ag is not just for growing things on the farm -- its for the entire process of developing and delivering food and goods to the ultimate consumer -- you and me.

Recently there was a news story out of Urbana Illinois, Sharon Knight and a team from the Controlled Ecological Life Support System at the University of Illinois are researching the best varieties of crops like potatoes, soybeans, wheat, lettuce and rice to be grown on space stations -- perhaps near the moon or Mars. Is this idea really as far out as it might seem at first glance? I think not.

Plants in space will serve two purposes. They will recycle human waste used as fertilizer, and they will convert carbon dioxide exhaled by the astronauts into oxygen they can breathe. The plants also will produce the food for a nutritious vegetarian diet.

Those making career decisions need to realize the breadth of the challenges to be met, satisfaction to be derived and money to be made by working in an industry that touches people as they eat their three square meals a day or as they graze on health food all day long.

Next--

We must realize that agriculture does have an image. High tech to some -- hayseed to others.

Those of us who work in the industry every day help mold the image we see.

We must rise above the coffee shop clatter and develop a teaching curriculum built on existing research that accurately states how people DO feel towards farmers.

A great deal of research does exist that clearly and repeatedly tells us that the vast majority of people love, almost revere the farmer. The STATISTICAL MAJORITY!

Few farmers emotionally agree! Are they lost in the back forty? Not entirely.

Farmers develop their self perception based on the personal feedback they get -- day in --day out. The mistake that is being made is mistaking the feelings being expressed

by their neighbors as being representative of the general public at large. The truth is that the closer one gets to the farm the more the manure smells.

The great distance that exists between the farm and the city actually benefits the farmer.

Dwight Eisenhower once said, "Farming looks mighty easy when your plow is a pencil and you're thousand miles from the cornfield."

Big city people only see the romantic side of the farm. They see the country through rose colored glasses.

Next door neighbors probably have a more accurate balanced perception of the farmer, but their numbers are too few to have real economic impact on issues crucial to farming. Yet far too many farmers go around with a chip on their shoulder that colors many of their decisions.

I think most of us would agree that a healthy self image must be at the heart of healthy farm occupations. Wouldn't it be fun to develop a course that makes people feel good to be a farmer and proud to be connected with agriculture and make it a requirement for a vo-ag degree...in high school or for an ag degree? - in college

THIRD

Education is not a one-sided responsibility. Consumers need to know more about where their food originates. The National Academy of Sciences recently stated, and I quote:

"...Americans are appallingly ignorant about agricultural issues, such as farm subsidies, use of chemicals and food safety." I agree!

The report goes on to say that teaching about agriculture doesn't require major curriculum changes, only interested teachers and school officials, and some innovations in structuring traditional courses -- I agree, but someone needs to mainstream existing content into relevant course material and teach...perhaps a course with a consumer education title that deals with food availability, pricing, politics and international implications. Or perhaps it's a very basic course on agriculture, food and fiber that is a requirement for all high school degrees -- rural and urban? When these courses are mandatory, let me know. I know some people who would benefit from them.

A well educated public will be needed to understand, accept and take full advantage of the changes that will be the result of the next agricultural revolution...biogenetic engineering.

Products will soon be coming out of the research laboratory into the consumer world. What base will consumers

use to judge these products? Facts and knowledge? Or rumor and suspension?

Granted Biogenetics is a heady subject. But isn't there room for and the need for such a course in our junior colleges and urban community colleges? I think there is.

FOURTH

We need to expand our prospecting for students into new territory. I am certain that vo-ag programs aimed at recruiting kids from towns of 50,000 population or less will continue to have the same success rate as they now do. If yours is good -- I take my hat off to you. If you're seeing declining enrollments and declining budgets then some changes may be in order.

We need to accept the fact that the demographics of society have changed, and entertain the notion that the next wave of vo-ag students will need to come in large part from the urban areas, and even the inner cities. Are we structuring a course to attract these students? Are we working to plow this virgin ground?

There are examples in this area that can lead us to successes and away from failure. Chicago has the Chicago High School For Agricultural Sciences. Philadelphia has the Walter Biddle Saul High School. These schools are basking in the excitement of motivated students who keep attendance in

Chicago at the 93% level -- despite the fact that many students travel an hour or more on public transportation each day just to get to class.

Closer to home Monsanto has found graduates of the Veterinary Technologist Program at Jefferson Junior College to be extremely capable veterinary assistants in our Chesterfield Research facility and our Environmental Health Lab.

Which brings up another point. "Egg head" titles and multi-syllable words that can scare off students need to be avoided. Not everyone in science needs to have a Phd.

There are many positions that can be filled by specially trained trade school or junior college graduates.

And here I think the lions share of responsibility rests with industry to help identify those kinds of jobs.

PAUSE

One inescapable fact exists that must be reckoned with. The continuing fall out in numbers of farmers will mandate change. Vo-ag can't simply be for the farm kid who wants to follow in the foot steps of his or her parents. There simply are fewer farmer parents to follow.

The number of farmers will continue to decline as modern science adds new options for production agriculture.

But production agriculture is only one segment of farming. And so that we stay on the same wave length, I'll offer my definition of what it is...production agriculture refers only to the traditional row crops such as corn, beans, wheat, and large scale animal operations.

Speciality farms have not suffered the same fate as the larger, more traditional farms.

That presents another challenge for all of us. How do we expand the fence line that has traditionally defined farming.

Again, just recently the farm page in a local paper carried the story of Mike and Debi Herren who want to live and raise kids on a farm. But what kind of farm could they start, at a time when farmers were going out of business?

They grow snails and are a quality provider for French restaurants that serve escargot. And they're doing this is southern Illinois!

What does this mean to you and me? I think it gives us an opportunity. An opportunity for city kids to grow up to be farmers and for displaced farm kids to stay on the farm.

Probably not a farm producing the same products that Mother and Father produced, but in many cases niche products that fit a changing modern lifestyle. Rural kids need not be deprived of a life style they desire.

Farmers also will increasingly need sophisticated support help from highly trained professionals.

Biotechnology, an important science for Monsanto, is just one example of the new needs farmers will have in the future. Who will staff this industry, who will be the sales force, the consultants, the county agents, the movers and the shakers...and what kind of educational requirements will they need?

Will it be the kids born on the farm -- kids who want to raise their kids in the country -- those who want to maintain a lifestyle similar to their parents? It would be nice if they could. Can our education system meet their personal needs?

The need for para-professionals exists in several areas. These people need a sound foundation in basic math, biology, business economics -- challenging and interesting areas put together with a focus that aims on the unique needs of farming. These skills could be developed by modifying course offerings in Trade Schools and Community Colleges to meet the future needs of the ag-industry.

PAUSE

These are not magical answers to mystical questions. I'm sure many of you have thought of some or all of what I've just said. But I do feel the answers that finally solve the problems we face will touch on stereotypes, public and self image, education and plowing new ground and finding a surprising new enthusiasm for agriculture.

Innovation and change are at the heart of all these thoughts. And perhaps the heart of this message is the need to broaden the concept of vo-ag. Many are doing this already. But more needs to be done.

I'm reluctant to suggest -- but for the sake of making a point I will -- I'll suggest that even the name needs to be changed to more accurately reflect the diversity and breath of the areas that now surround traditional vo-ag education.

Agronomist, farmer, veterinarian -- familiar vocations will be joined by floriculturist, aquaculturist, biotechnologist, environmentalist, all of whom will need support from lawyers, electricians, and yes educators.

It is hard to think of any profession that will be exempt...that will not be needed. Yet all professions need exposure to the unique needs and demands that farming has.

And the need for specialized training will accelerate in the future. Half of the items now available in modern supermarkets were not in existence a decade ago.

The changes on the farm have been equally dramatic.

Leaders, like you, have the opportunity of facing some of the most challenging problems any crop of educators has ever faced. And at the same time you face the possibilities of making some of the most dramatic changes in ag education anyone has ever seen.

Monsanto is dedicated to supporting you. We're ready to stand beside, to counsel and in some cases to fund the creative, the innovative, the experimental. For you see -- as you succeed -- and as American agriculture succeeds -- so will we.

I don't have the answers, I have some thoughts and some pretty strong feelings towards the subject. I hope I've tested your views in a positive way.

As I'm stepping out of my environment by speaking on a subject you know so much about -- you too must step outside your normal sphere of influence and make your presence felt outside your specific vo-ag department.

Mixing ideas, sharing a point of view, giving and gaining insight are some of the ingredients that produce creative solutions. And creative solutions are what is needed.

Thank You!